

Men *of the* **Word**

Searching for Significance

A Study in
Ecclesiastes

Wednesdays, 7–9 pm
Worship Center

Matters of Death and Life

Ecclesiastes 9:1–18

Jerome (c. AD 342–420)

- Early church theologian and translator, known for his translation of the Latin *Vulgate*.
- Applied an allegorical approach to Ecclesiastes, resulting in a push toward asceticism and celibacy.
- Overturned by the Reformer's literal approach to the book.



Saint Jerome Writing, by Caravaggio, 1607
(the skull portrays his contemplation of the brevity of life)



I. Rest in the Sovereignty of God

Ecclesiastes 9:1

*"Righteous men . . . are in
the hands of God."*

“For I have taken all this to my heart and explain it that righteous men, wise men, and their deeds are in the hand of God. Man does not know whether *it will be* love or hatred; anything awaits him” (9:1).

- “This verse is actually the book of Ecclesiastes in a nutshell” (David Gibson, *Living Life Backward*, 107).
- **“For . . . all this”** refers specifically to 8:16–17 and the need to “walk by faith” considering life’s many unanswerable questions, but generally to everything Solomon studied in Ecclesiastes.
- **“I have taken . . . to my heart”** – not mere intellectual awareness, but whole-personed conviction (heart, mind, and soul).

“For I have taken all this to my heart and explain it that **righteous men, wise men, and their deeds** are in **the hand of God**. **Man does not know** whether *it will be* **love or hatred**; **anything** **awaits him**” (9:1).

- “**Righteous men, wise men, and their deeds**” – Solomon limits the focus of his assertion to a specific category of humanity.
- “**The hand of God**” refers specifically to God’s sovereign control (Proverbs 21:1)—but a control that is wise and good (2 Samuel 24:14).
- Why is this so important? “**Man does not know . . . [what] awaits him.**”
- “**Love or hatred**” – an idiomatic expression to refer to *prosperity or adversity, straight circumstances or bent ones* (1:15; 7:13). **Men of the Word**

“There is no attribute more comforting to His children than that of God’s sovereignty. Under the most adverse circumstances, in the most severe trials, they believe that sovereignty has ordained their afflictions, that sovereignty overrules them, and that sovereignty will sanctify them all. There is nothing for which the children ought to more earnestly contend to than the doctrine of their Master over all creation—the Kingship of God over all the works of His own hands—the throne of God and His right to sit upon that throne . . . for it is God upon the throne whom we trust.”

—Charles Spurgeon





II. Reflect upon the Certainty of Death

Ecclesiastes 9:2–6

*“There is one fate for
all men.”*

“It is the same for all. There is one fate for the righteous and for the wicked; for the good, for the clean and for the unclean; for the man who offers a sacrifice and for the one who does not sacrifice. As the good man is, so is the sinner; as the swearer is, so is the one who is afraid to swear. This is an evil in all that is done under the sun, that there is one fate for all men. Furthermore, the hearts of the sons of men are full of evil and insanity is in their hearts throughout their lives.

Afterwards they *go* to the dead. For whoever is joined with all the living, there is hope; surely a live dog is better than a dead lion. For the living know they will die; but the dead do not know anything, nor have they any longer a reward, for their memory is forgotten. Indeed their love, their hate and their zeal have already perished, and they will no longer have a share in all that is done under the sun.”

—Ecclesiastes 9:2–6

Men of the Word

“It is the same for all. There is one fate . . .” (Ecclesiastes 9:2)

“for the righteous”

“for the unrighteous”

“for the clean”

“for the unclean”

“for the man who offers a sacrifice”

“for the one who does not sacrifice”

“the good man”

“the sinner”

“the swearer [of vows]”

“the one who is afraid to swear”

“This is **an evil** in all that is done **under the sun**, that there is one fate for all men. Furthermore, **the hearts of the sons of men are full of evil and insanity is in their hearts throughout their lives.** Afterwards they **go to the dead**” (9:3).

- “An evil . . . under the sun” – that the righteous and unrighteous meet the very same fate on this earth is a “misery,” something dreadful.

- But there is a two-fold explanation:

(a) “the hearts of the sons of men are full of evil,” and
(b) “insanity is in their hearts throughout their lives.”

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(Ephesians
4:17–19)**

- “To the dead” – all are under *the curse* (Genesis 3:19; Romans 5:12; 6:23a).

“For whoever is joined with all the living, **there is hope**; surely **a live dog** is better than **a dead lion**” (9:4).

- With the living “**there is hope**” or “**confidence**” – the opportunity to reckon with the reality of death and steward life appropriately.
- “To be alive is to have the day of opportunity in our hands in a way that we do not have when we’re dead” (Gibson, *Living Life Backward*, 109).



- The “**dog**” was despised in ancient Israel (Psalm 22:16; Proverbs 26:11).
- The “**lion**” was revered (Proverbs 30:30).



“For the living know they will die; but the dead do not know anything, nor have they any longer a reward, for their memory is forgotten. Indeed their love, their hate and their zeal have already perished, and they will no longer have a share in all that is done under the sun” (9:5–6).

- Solomon is not attempting to describe *the afterlife*, although he has referred to it briefly elsewhere (3:17; 11:9; 12:14). His focus in Ecclesiastes is *life under the sun*.
- The living man has an advantage, if he grasps the reality of death:
 - (a) he will meet God as his judge;
 - (b) he will give an account for his life;
 - (c) he must steward his life well.



III. Rejoice in the Gifts of Life

Ecclesiastes 9:7–10

*“Enjoy life . . . all the days
of your fleeting life.”*

“Go *then*, eat your bread in happiness and drink your wine with a cheerful heart; for God has already approved your works. Let your clothes be white all the time, and let not oil be lacking on your head. Enjoy life with the woman whom you love all the days of your fleeting life which He has given to you under the sun; for this is your reward in life and in your toil in which you have labored under the sun. Whatever your hand finds to do, do *it* with *all* your might; for there is no activity or planning or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol where you are going.”

—Ecclesiastes 9:7–10

“Go then!”

“It’s a wakeup call. There’s no time to waste. Stop your complaining! Stop nursing your anger! Stop brooding about your problems! Get over your anxiety!” —Sidney Greidanus

“Why should anyone who truly fears God have the joy of life stolen out from under him because of the unresolved perplexities still remaining in the partially disclosed plan of God?” —Walter Kaiser

- Verses 7–9 comprise another *carpe diem* (“Seize the day!”) statement (see 2:24–26; 3:12–13, 22; 5:18–19; 11:7–10).
- These statements have been increasing in intensity, and 9:7–9 provides the most intense of them all.
- Rather than a “better-than” statement, vv. 7–9 include direct commands to *enjoy!*
- “Preparing to die, and to die well, does not mean drawing the curtains and dressing in black and thinking morbid thoughts. Preparing to die means thinking about how to live” (Gibson, *Living Life Backward*, 110).
- “Here is God’s bright remedy. *Go thy way*. Enjoy your mercies while you have them” (Charles Bridges, *Ecclesiastes*, 219).

“Seize the Day!” (Ecclesiastes 9:7–9)

“Eat your bread in happiness”

Enjoy sustenance

“Drink your wine with a cheerful heart”

Enjoy refreshment

“God has already approved your works”

Enjoy labor

“Let your clothes be white all the time”

Enjoy comfort

“Let not oil be lacking on your head”

Enjoy gladness

“Enjoy life with the woman whom you love”

Enjoy marriage

“But the Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons, by means of the hypocrisy of liars seared in their own conscience as with a branding iron, *men* who forbid marriage *and advocate* abstaining from foods which God has created to be gratefully shared in by those who believe and know the truth. For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with gratitude; for it is sanctified by means of the word of God and prayer.”

—1 Timothy 4:1–4

“This is the day which the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.”

—Psalm 118:24

“Whatever your hand finds to do, **do it with all your might**; for there is no activity or planning or knowledge or wisdom **in Sheol** where you are going” (9:10).

- “**In Sheol**” – “the grave” – again, Solomon’s focus is not on *the afterlife*, but on stewardship of *life under the sun*.
- “**With all your might**” – A call to *be all in!* To *live life to the fullest!* To *wear out* rather than *rust out*—but for the right reasons.
- It is a commission to *use* the gifts and opportunities God has given in life.
- **1 Corinthians 10:31** – “Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.”

“Make Haste, O Man, To Live” —by Horatius Bonar (1808–89)

[1] Make haste, O man, to live,
For thou so soon must die;
Time hurries past thee like the breeze;
How swift its moments fly!
Make hast, O man, to live.

[2] Make haste, O man, to do
Whatever must be done;
Thou hast no time to lose in sloth,
Thy day will soon be gone.
Make haste, O man, to live!

[3] Up then with speed, and work;
Fling ease and self away:
This is no time for thee to sleep;
Up, watch, and work, and pray!
Make haste, O man, to live.

Make haste, O man, to live;
Thy Time is almost o'er;
O sleep not, dream not, but arise;
The Judge is at the door.
Make haste, O man, to live.



IV. Recognize the Uncertainty of Outcomes

Ecclesiastes 9:11–12

*"The race is not to the
swift."*

“I again saw under the sun that the race is not to the swift and the battle is not to the warriors, and neither is bread to the wise nor wealth to the discerning nor favor to men of ability; for time and chance overtake them all. Moreover, man does not know his time: like fish caught in a treacherous net and birds trapped in a snare, so the sons of men are ensnared at an evil time when it suddenly falls on them.”

—Ecclesiastes 9:11–12

“Occurrences and happenings overtake them all” (Ecclesiastes 9:11)

“the race is not to the swift”

speed doesn't always win races

“the battle is not to warriors”

strength doesn't always win wars

“neither is bread to the wise”

wisdom isn't always successful

“nor wealth to the discerning”

intelligence isn't always prosperous

“nor favor to men of ability”

skill isn't always popular

“Moreover, man does not know **his time**; **like fish** caught in a treacherous net **and birds** trapped in a snare, so the sons of men are **ensnared at an evil time** when it suddenly falls on them” (9:12).

- “**His time**” – In the same way man cannot guarantee outcomes in life (v. 11), he cannot know the length of his days nor the moment of his death.
- When it comes to a man’s death, it typically arrives as unexpected and undesired as it does for “**fish**” and “**birds.**”
- “**Ensnared at an evil time**” – death springs when man does not expect it.



“Come now, you who say, ‘Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, and spend a year there and engage in business and make a profit.’ Yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow. You are *just* a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away. Instead, *you ought* to say, ‘If the Lord wills, we will live and also do this or that.’ But as it is, you boast in your arrogance; all such boasting is evil.”

—James 4:13–16



V. Recall the Parameters of Wisdom

Ecclesiastes 9:13–18

*“Wisdom is better . . . but
one sinner destroys much
good.”*

“Also this I came to see as wisdom under the sun, and it impressed me. There was a small city with few men in it and a great king came to it, surrounded it and constructed large siegeworks against it. But there was found in it a poor wise man and he delivered the city by his wisdom. Yet no one remembered that poor man. So I said, ‘Wisdom is better than strength.’ But the wisdom of the poor man is despised and his words are not heeded. The words of the wise heard in quietness are *better* than the shouting of a ruler among fools. Wisdom is better than weapons of war, but one sinner destroys much good.”

—Ecclesiastes 9:13–18

- Solomon again emphasizes a balanced perspective on “wisdom” (“wise” and “wisdom” occur 7x in these verses).
- He recalls a particular historical incident (perhaps something akin to 2 Samuel 20:14–22) and draws several lessons from it:
 - (1) Wisdom is better than strength/authority (9:14–15a, 16a, 17–18a).
 - (2) People often don’t recognize the benefit of the wise (9:15b, 16b).
 - (3) Folly can easily undo the actions of the wise (9:18b).
- Indeed, wisdom is “better,” but it has its limits. People are fickle (cf. 4:13–18).
- Once again, wisdom is not the ultimate solution.

“Learn to estimate men by their *wisdom* and godliness, not by their outward show. Value *wisdom* as the gift of God. The more we feel our need of the gift, the more stimulating must be our earnest pleading for the continued supply. . . . Learn also to prepare for disappointment. Work for the best interests of your fellow-creatures; but not for their approbation or reward. Let not their praise be our motive.”

—Bridges, *Ecclesiastes*, 230

Hear the Preacher!

*"The words of wise
men are like goads . . ."*



1. Don't waste your life.
2. Focus on what is important.
3. Enjoy life with all your might.
4. Orient everything around God's glory.

A black and white photograph of an open book with hands turning a page. The background is dark, and the lighting highlights the texture of the paper and the hands. The title 'Men of the Word' is overlaid in white text.

Men *of the* Word

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